

An ill-informed plenary council for the Catholic Church.

Peter Johnstone

Only those in blind denial could fail to realise that the Catholic Church in Australia is now in the midst of a massive and existential crisis, a crisis which the Archbishop of Brisbane, Mark Coleridge, has called “the biggest crisis in its history”. It is, above all, a crisis of governance, and the Australian bishops’ main response to it has been to propose a Plenary Council for 2020. Yet the planning for the plenary council is already suffering from the very poor governance that the council needs to address. As yet, the bishops have announced no plans for consulting the people of their own dioceses on the issues. Not surprisingly many Catholics continue to desert the Church as they witness its substantial problems being kicked down the road to 2020 with little prospect of solution.

The bishops in Australia are “[circling the wagons](#)” in a defensive response to the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse rather than responsibly considering the damning evidence of the dysfunctional governance of the Church. The Commission has condemned the criminal sexual rampaging among two generations of priests and predominantly male religious who abused thousands of innocent and unprotected children, and the criminal cover-up by two generations of Catholic bishops and religious superiors, leading to further children being sexually abused.

The Royal Commission has exposed the Church’s dysfunctional governance and its lack of public accountability (a concept foreign to the governance of the Catholic Church), and a lack of the related qualities of transparency and inclusion of all the people of God, especially women. These failures have been normalized in today’s Catholic Church, yet fly in the face of Christian teaching and the Second Vatican Council which called for synodality, co-responsibility and subsidiarity. There has been an effective rejection of the Council’s vision in these areas, reflecting a preference for autocratic control over inclusive and accountable leadership.

Vatican II explicitly called for synods “to flourish with new vigour.” Yet, in the 52 years since, the Australian bishops have not convened a single provincial or plenary council/synod, and only five bishops have held a diocesan synod. Rather, the bishops have overwhelmingly preferred to govern autocratically.

Meanwhile, the numbers of those who self-identify as Catholic continue to decline (down a further 2.7% on Census Day 2016 despite increases from immigration) and there is historically low Mass attendance, an ongoing shortage of vocations to the priesthood and religious life, widespread amalgamation of parishes, and an increasing reliance of overseas-recruited priests.

The Australian bishops see the proposed national plenary council/synod in 2020 (the first in 83 years) as an adequate means of addressing the critical need for reform, some three years after the Royal Commission reports. That confidence is misplaced. Deferring necessary and known immediate needs for governance reform to 2020 is simply not responsible, and a

plenary council without the informed views of the people of each and every diocese will be ill-informed.

Planning for the plenary council to date is excessively centralised, an approach inconsistent with the teachings of the Second Vatican Council and of Pope Francis, and which continues to deny accountability to the people of the Church and collegiality and subsidiarity in structure and process. The ACBC's appointment of an executive committee (based on a confidential process of consultation) to prepare for the plenary council is helpful, but part of a top-down process; few bishops are consulting the grassroots of their own dioceses.

Diocesan synods have been an integral part of church governance since the time of the apostles. Amazingly, no plenary or provincial synods have been held in Australia since the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) called for synods to "flourish with fresh vigour" and insisted that the laity have an active role in them; the Church's canon law reinforces this need for synods. Some few bishops have at times convened less formal assemblies, an appropriate alternative to the more constrained canonical synod.

Proper planning for the plenary council demands preliminary consultation with the many Australian dioceses that experience the daily challenges of Christian life. Blessed John Henry Newman, the 19th-century's most important English-speaking Catholic theologian said: "In order to know the tradition of the apostles we must have recourse to the faithful ... Their voice then is the voice of tradition."

This *sensus fidei fidelium* (the sense of faith of the faithful) is critical to the teaching of the Church. The Holy See has reinforced that teaching in the International Theological Commission report, '*Sensus Fidei* in the Life of the Church' (2014), referring to the Vatican II document on Revelation, which stated that : "The faithful have an instinct for the truth of the Gospel, which enables them to recognise and endorse Christian doctrine and practice, and to reject what is false".

That instinct is particularly important at a time when the Church's hierarchy has been found to have failed abysmally in the protection of children.

Australian bishops generally are reluctant to engage with the faithful. It may be, as inferred in a recent article in '*Melbourne Catholic*' (Nov. 2017, published by the Archbishop of Melbourne), that the bishops have been affected by organisational trauma brought on by the shocking public revelation of institutional failure to protect children from clerical child sexual abuse. That article described the defining characteristics of organisational trauma as "patterns of dysfunction, despair and hopelessness": "The organisation becomes isolated. There's an over-reliance on internal relationships for safety and support and a suspicion towards outsiders."

The article notes that "the emotional tenor of the community is affected" and observes that: "People need to be able to talk about their experiences, and what the crisis means for them and their faith in the institution".

The preparation and planning for the 2020 plenary council lacks a shared commitment by the bishops to consult the faithful, particularly within their own dioceses and parishes. How can the voices of Catholics throughout the country inform the considerations of the plenary council if their own bishops do not listen to those voices?

The Australian Catholic Bishops Conference, has [described](#) the plenary council as:

“put(ting) into practice pastoral plans **with the help of the people of God** to prepare for the future. It also **carries forward the call of Pope Francis** for the Church to become truly synodal in its **engagement with the whole Catholic community.**” (Bolding added.)

The preparations for the plenary council do not meet this rhetoric. The processes in place do not ‘carry forward’ Pope Francis’ call for “engagement with the whole Catholic community”, which requires engagement by diocesan bishops with their people.

It seems that the plenary council may become no more than further “[circling the wagons](#)” and business as usual. Some bishops may be hoping that the prospect of a strongly marketed plenary council will be sufficient to silence the critics until 2020, by which time the impact of the Royal Commission might no longer be front-of-mind and compelling.

Archbishop Coleridge, appointed by his fellow bishops to guide the preparation for the 2020 plenary council, has made many insightful statements about the challenges facing the Church exposed by the Royal Commission. Coleridge has stated that the Plenary Council 2020 is a recognition that “we can no longer put up a sign saying Business as usual”, that there would have to be genuine and thorough responses to all that had come to light in the Royal Commission into child sexual abuse, that he expected there would be consideration of other issues in the public gaze, and that he hoped the agenda will be generated by genuine consultation of the whole Church between now and 2020. These aspirations are not being realised and some reform cannot wait until 2020. It is time for the bishops to walk the talk.

Given the widespread lack of a commitment by bishops to establish structures and processes to consult within their own dioceses and parishes, the rhetoric regarding the plenary council is empty. Any genuine consultation of the whole Church must be driven by diocesan bishops, each of whom has individual and full responsibility for his diocese and is required by canon law to “show himself [concerned](#) for all the [Christian faithful entrusted](#) to his [care](#)” (Can. 383 §1).

It is the proper function of a diocesan bishop to ensure that the plenary council is informed by the views of his people; without that input, the 2020 plenary council will be ill-informed and contribute little to the necessary renewal of the Church. The plenary council may, however, succeed in kicking the failings of the Church down the road for a few years, to the further detriment of the Church.

Peter Johnstone is President of Catholics for Renewal, an organisation with many supporters who are committed Catholics determined to seek reform of the dysfunctional governance of the Catholic Church institution. He has qualifications in governance and theology, and appeared before the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse as a member of a Governance panel in the Commission’s wrap-up hearings on the Catholic Church in February 2017.

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